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SKILLS LIST MUST BE REFORMED TO ALLOW PROJECT DELIVERY

The lack of immediate access to skilled workers from overseas will have a significant impact on the ability to deliver major transport infrastructure projects, according to two of the nation's leading transport industry associations.

[Roads Australia](#) (RA) and the [Australasian Railway Association](#) (ARA) say the issues raised in their [joint submission](#) to Federal Parliament's inquiry to skilled migration in March will be amplified by the major infrastructure spend in this month's Federal Budget unless remedial action is taken.

Both RA and the ARA are calling on Government to update the Priority Skilled Occupations List to include specialist skills that are critical to the delivery of major road and rail construction projects.

"Governments are relying on the delivery of transport infrastructure projects to stimulate post-COVID economic activity. Our industry is willing to play its part – but the delivery of such a massive project pipeline faces challenges from a shortage of skilled labour," said Michael Kilgariff, CEO of Roads Australia.

"The Federal Budget contained major investments in training opportunities – and of course these are welcome. But the delivery of such training takes time, and the shortages being faced by industry are immediate."

A survey of ARA members highlighted in the joint submission found 68 per cent of rail business relied on skilled overseas workers prior to the pandemic, with more than 60 per cent of businesses indicating these workers were critical to the delivery of high-value projects. More than half of the survey respondents indicated they expected their demand for skilled overseas workers to increase over the next 12-18 months.

"The ongoing closure of Australia's international borders has made it very difficult for industry to source some of the specialised skills that are needed on major transport infrastructure projects. We need to be ready to attract the skilled workers to support these projects once borders reopen," said Caroline Wilkie, CEO of the ARA.

"The current Priority Skilled Occupation List identifies 19 occupations considered as being critical skills to support Australia's economic recovery. Of that list, the only skills that are relevant to the construction of railways and roads are construction project managers and mechanical engineers."

"If we want to realise the benefits these major infrastructure projects can deliver, there needs to be greater flexibility offered to industry to secure skilled workers. These workers are critical for meeting immediate shortages and boosting local industry capacity by sharing their knowledge with locally-based workers."

RA and the ARA say that while the injection of a further \$10 billion worth of transport infrastructure projects in the 2021/22 Federal Budget is welcome, it also increases strain on the already limited skills pool. Improvements to the Australia's skilled migration program are now imperative to ensure industry can deliver major transport infrastructure projects in line with government and community expectations.

They say a positive first step would be to require the Skills Commissioner to consider an industry's ability to give effect to government policies expressed in documents such as the Budget when nominating occupations for inclusion on the Priority Skilled Occupation List.

"At present, the Federal Government's Global Talent Visa Program lists one of its ten target sectors as 'infrastructure and tourism'. While both industries are undoubtedly vital, they are completely different and rely on entirely different skill sets. It is important the infrastructure sector is recognised within the list as a distinct category," said Michael Kilgariff, CEO of Roads Australia.

RA and the ARA confirmed the Infrastructure and Transport Ministers' Meeting (ITMM) on 28 May presented a good opportunity to urgently consider the inclusion of additional specialist skills on the Priority Skilled Occupation List to ensure project delivery is not disrupted by labour shortages.

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Further Information:

Simon Morgan, Director Corporate Affairs - Roads Australia – 0403 477 131

Joeley Pettit, General Manager Corporate Affairs, Sustainability and Member Engagement - Australasian Railway Association - 0407 061 421